

# SIMON EVANS'

## Myth of the Ordinary Language

By Ernesto Menéndez-Conde

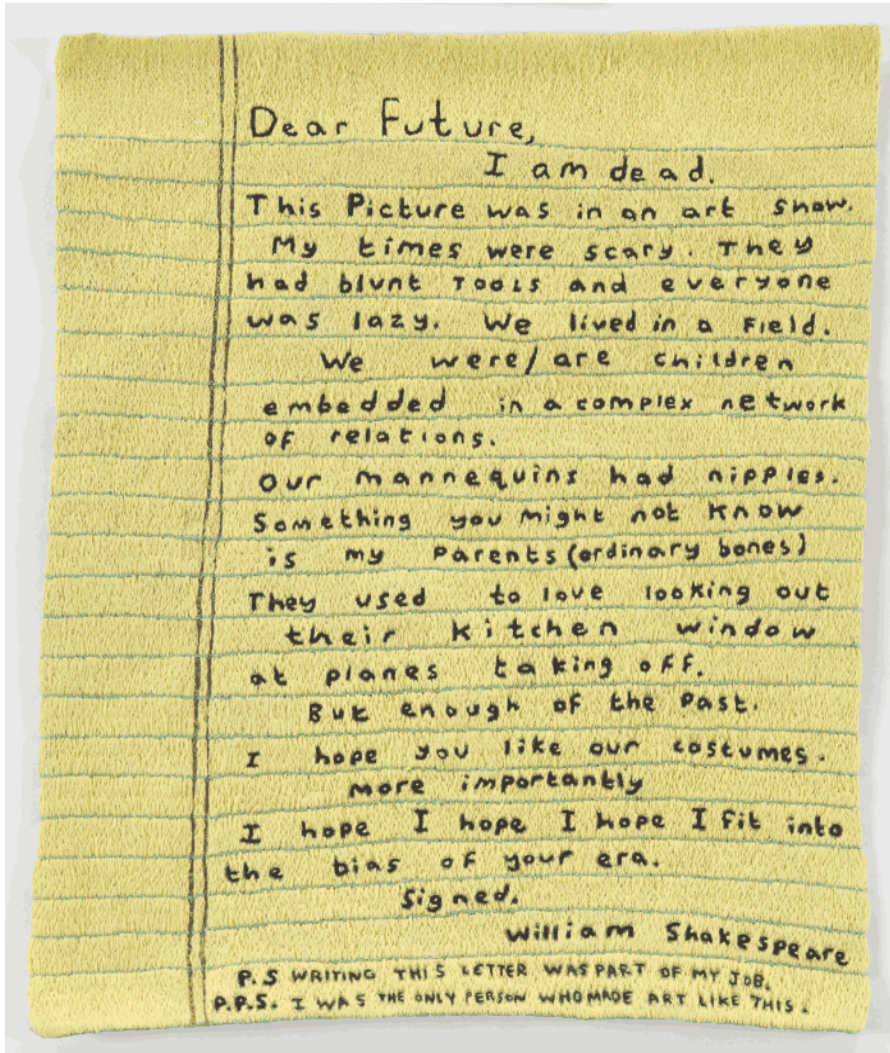
**IN VOCABULARY**, a piece recently shown at James Cohan Gallery, the British artist Simon Evans renders his own definition of art. It is, he writes, a myth of ordinary language. Even if these words are not necessarily meant to be taken seriously—humor is everywhere in Evans' images—they may help to posit some questions about contemporary art. I will mention three of them, which are related to Evans' body of work. How, specifically, can ordinary language become myth? Does this myth need the art gallery, or some other auratic space as its channel of distribution? How can a myth, even if it's one of ordinary language, be articulated in everyday life? Through his work, Evans answers these questions. A way of turning ordinary language into myth is through an entanglement of humor, confessions, and written words.

Many of his pieces are, literally speaking, works to be read and most of the time the writings are hilarious. Jokes are encapsulated in brief sentences. Evans makes viewers laugh in ways that, it seems to me, are rather uncommon in contemporary art. I want to quote two of his notes (jokes), taken from *300 Secrets*, 2011:

When I was sixteen I pushed my mum down the stairs.  
My creative writing teacher had a seizure and I just laughed.

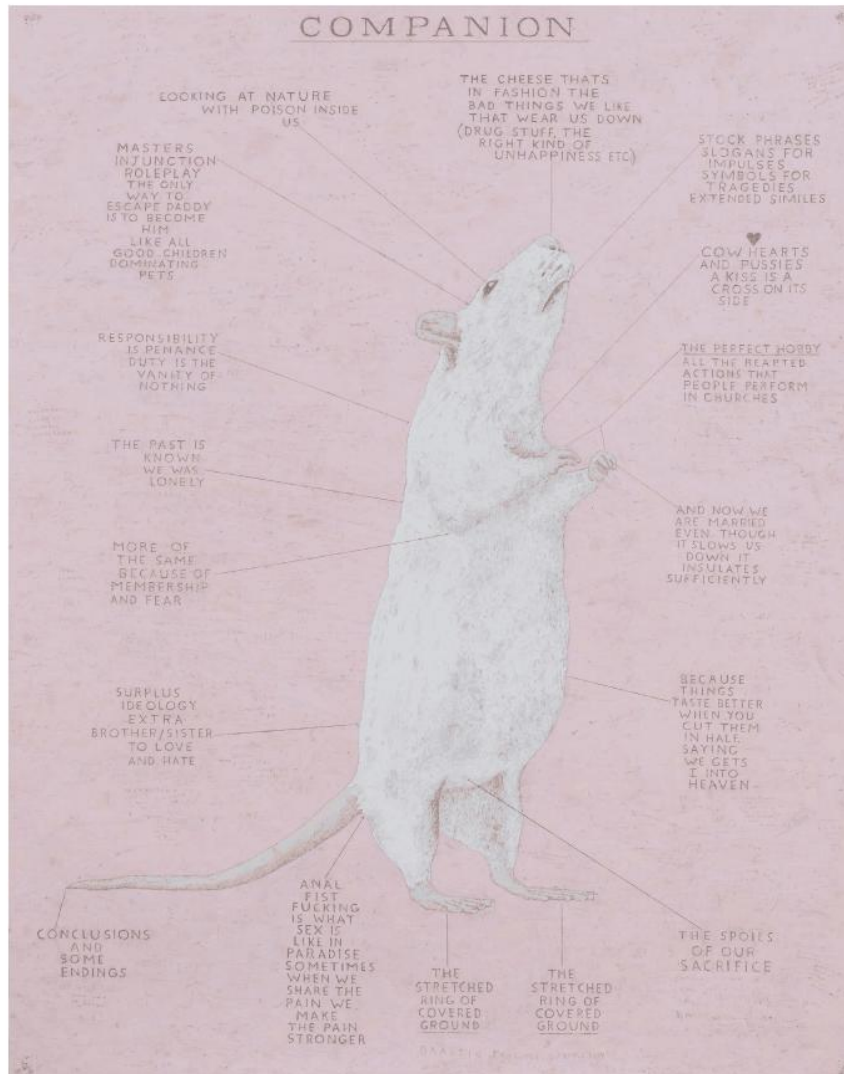
The artist doesn't use an obscure, conceptual, or philosophical rhetoric. On the contrary, he takes advantage of ordinary language in order to tell non-ordinary stories. Dark humor turns the character that tells the secret into a whimsical, uninhibited

48/www.artexperiencenyc.com



SIMON EVANS, *Letter To The Future*, 2011, Hand-stitched embroidery, 9 1/2 X 11 3/4 inches,  
Photo: Christopher Burke, © the artist  
Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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**SIMON EVANS, *Companion*, 2010, Pencil and scotch tape on paper, 42 1/4 X 59 1/4 inches, ©: the artist  
 Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai**

50/www.artexperiencenyc.com

person. Evans opens a gate to the unconscious, to the repressed, and to laughter. Many of his writings can be related to psychoanalytic practices, as if he were on a therapist's couch, spontaneously producing free associations, telling hidden and involuntary memories, interjecting bizarre thoughts, or bringing up witticisms against authority figures. Evans himself, paradoxically dealing with his own evils, exorcising his obsessions and nightmares, is one of the leitmotifs of *Shitty Heaven*, his recent show at James Cohan Gallery. The jokes oscillate between what could be found in literary fiction to the kind of writing in a diary. Through his humorous introspection, his art could be perceived as a continuation of his everyday life. Art for Evans seems to be a therapeutic practice through which he learns how to come to terms with his own anguishes without a pathetic or grandiloquent mood. This lightness belongs to the joy of the ordinary: Evans produces irrelevant, non-transcendental representations of his ego. In a collage titled *Everyone*, 2011, miniscule portraits of hundreds of cultural icons, contemporary art dealers, relatives, and acquaintances are combined in infinitely complex diagram resembling a nonsensical family tree. All of them "from a long way off look like flies," writes Evans, taking a quotation from the Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*. The artist proposes genealogies and free associations, using cultural references as if he were thinking aloud. These associations belong to the everyday language in its own right.

Evans reminds us that today's ordinary thinking could be a chaotic web of readings, historical figures, contemporary politicians, movie stars, religious leaders, friends, and fictional characters connected in a spontaneous, playful or unexpected manner.

Another instance of Evans' use of ordinary language is in repetition. In the triptych *Positive Outcomes*, 2011, Evans endlessly writes the same words: 'the hand', 'the voice', 'positive outcomes.' They are inscribed in a square, a triangle, and a circle. From a distance the pieces look like abstract artworks. The words, obsessively repeated, resemble mantras or attempts to focus the mind. 'The hand' and 'The voice' could have both an erotic and a mystical dimension: the hand that touches or the hand that guides, the voice of the lover that whispers in the ear or the voice that tells a transcendental truth. These words

could also be read as a reference to artistic creativity: the hand (which creates) and the voice (the individuality of the artist). However, when combined with 'positive outcomes,' these lofty interpretations are immediately negated, implying a turn to the ordinary, as if we were just in front of a banal step-by-step method taken from a selfhelp manual.

Mapping everyday life seems to be another way of embracing ordinary language as myth. The collage titled *Shitty Heaven*, which gives its title to the show, has the structure of a diagram. Evans blurs the boundaries between a street plan and the blueprint of a house. At the center there is a circle, which is labeled "Abyss of Excessive Pleasure and Trauma." The plan includes both a gallery and a gym. The museum is not necessarily opposed to the bedroom, even if they are placed in opposite corners. In *Shitty Heaven*, 2010, art institutions are not dissociated from everyday life, the walls of the museum are not different from the ones of the bar, the clinic, the studio, or the cinema. Evans' calls into question the avant-garde belief in the opposition between art institutions and life.

The ordinary language also involves graphic elements. In *Shitty Heaven*, there are many small drawings: some open books, an apple, a pipe, a toy, a lizard, some furniture, and many other figures. They are drawn with remarkably simple contour lines in a cartoonish manner, making them look somewhat naive. In almost every case there is a text—usually a joke—associated with the small image. The caption defines the object by giving it a social or existential connotation. Thus, a pipe goes along with the text: "social disease of nostalgia", the weight-lifting equipment is matched with "a tool for living alone" and a picture of a cat with what seems to be a tender note to the pet: "Dear cat, your dog food is costing me my freedom."

The ordinary language here becomes myth through visually

**PAGES 52 & 53:**

**SIMON EVANS**

*Everyone*, 2011

Photo collage, pen, paper, colored white out, lint, tape on board  
 140 X 200 cm

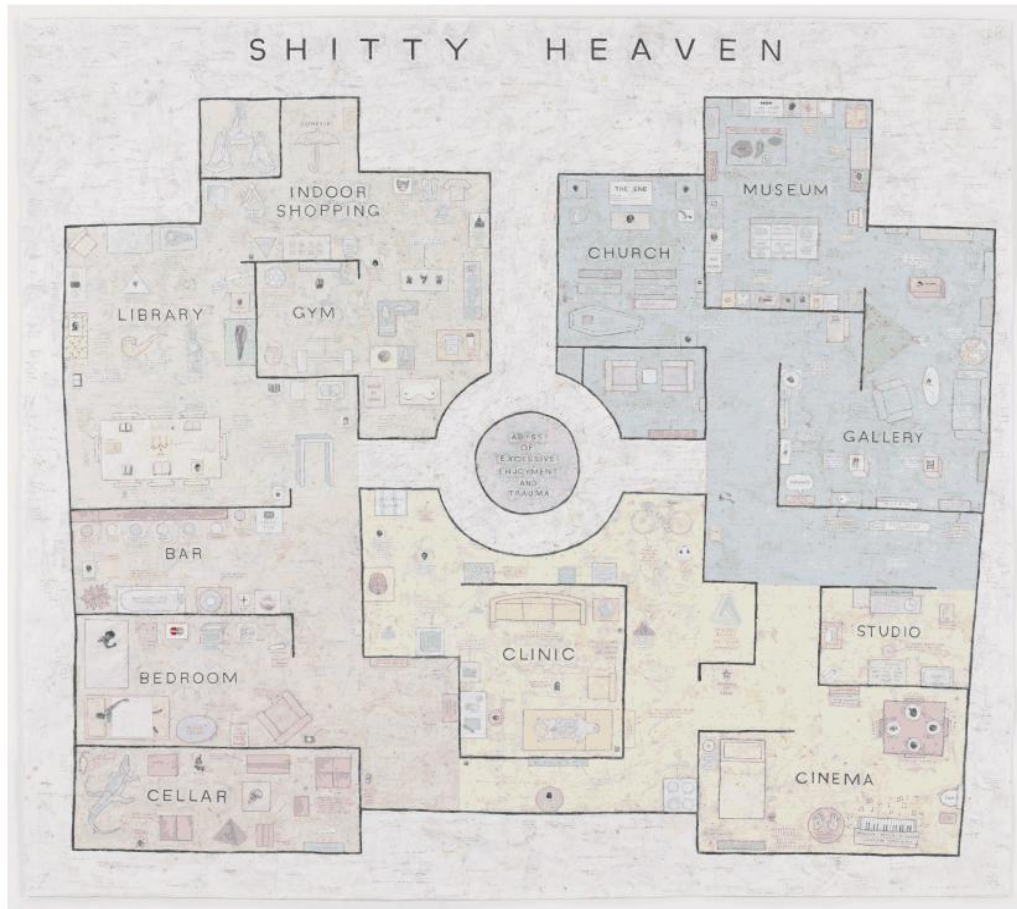
Photo: Jason Mandella

©: the artist

Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai



 SIMON EVANS' Myth of the Ordinary Language



**SIMON EVANS**

*Shitty Heaven*, 2010

Tape, paper and felt tip pen on paper

56 3/4 X 51 1/8 inches

Photo: Christopher Burke

©: the artist

Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai



**SIMON EVANS**  
*Shitty Heaven* (Detail)

compelling surfaces scattered with written text and schematic drawings, producing unconventional, humorous, and rather poetic analogies. The pictorial and graphic side of Evans' work seems hard to grasp in pictures. I said earlier that Evans' works are images to be read. I should add that they are at the same time strongly visual. The viewer must be in front of the work, in direct contact with the collages, in order to enjoy the delicacy of textures and color in the same manner that the act of reading his texts demands a closer look. Evans seems interested in the idea of a work of art that cannot be reproduced by photographic means. Playing a little bit with Beuys' notion that "everyone is an artist," Evans appeals to an unsophisticated technique: putting together small pieces of paper, glued with scotch

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 SIMON EVANS' Myth of the Ordinary Language

tape. Everyone can try it. Everyone could enjoy this practice, as if making a scrapbook. Nevertheless, Evans exploits this basic procedure with a virtuosic treatment, developing subtle chromatic harmonies, paying attention to small details, and taking advantage of the graphic side of the handwriting.

This is the main paradox of Evans' pieces—jokes, ordinary thoughts, and even banalities are integrated into visually compelling surfaces. They are attempts to reconcile ordinary language and formal artistic approaches which are indebted to abstract art, Paul Klee, and Apollinaire's calligrams.

Umberto Eco once wrote that modern culture pretends to innovate, even when it actually repeats itself (11). This may apply to contemporary art. Almost a century after the Russian avant-garde, futurist performances, and Dadaist provocations, we still believe that going against museums and bringing art to the streets is radical, no matter how obvious it is that this is actually a very effective way to end up on the walls of art institutions. Evans asks the question whether the streets and art institutions are actually antagonistic spaces. Today's art institutions are not necessarily conservative, as they were a century ago. In fact, as thinker Boris Groys has argued, museums of contemporary art have "accelerated the erasure between art and the profane object", and innovations in contemporary art are possible only inside the space of the museum (32-34). Evans' work bring to mind the possibility of taking advantage of auratic spaces in order to integrate art into everyday life by combining artistic forms, ordinary language, and laughter.

WORKS CITED

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-Groys, Boris. *Art Power*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2008

56/www.artexperiencenyc.com





**SIMON EVANS**

*Positive Outcomes*, 2011

Pen, paper, tape on board

112 X 112 cm

Photo: Jason Mandella

©: the artist

Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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